Abstract:

North Korea continues to provoke nuclear crises despite international pressure. This study identifies North Korea’s motives and thereby a policy to induce North Korea to forgo existing nuclear weapons and programs. I synthesize the literature and theory of nuclear abstinence and proliferation, assess which policy drivers led Pyongyang to persist in seeking nuclear capability in the post-Cold War era, and conclude that security issues underlie and overshadow other motivations. The cases of nuclear reversal show that coercion and isolation did not work and security guarantees by the involved parties thereby removing threat perception worked the best. For denuclearization of North Korea, the past experiences need to be carefully contemplated.

Keywords: North Korea, Motivations for Nuclear Weapons, Nuclear Reversal, Sanctions

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Ridiculing and defying constant warnings and appeals from the international community, including long-time ally China, North Korea tested its fourth nuclear test on January 6, 2016, which Pyongyang proudly announced a successful hydrogen bomb test. The test has been followed by various ranges of ballistic missile tests. The outraged international community by North Korea’s brazen provocation brought a wide consensus to impose the harshest ever sanctions on Pyongyang regime. Since North Korea’s first nuclear bomb test in October 2006, provocations, condemnations, and sanctions, followed by another round of provocations and sanctions have been an unfortunate cycle around the Korean peninsula for nearly a decade.

Even before the October 2006 North Korea, the most reclusive nation in the world, had challenged the nuclear non-proliferation efforts of the international community. Out of frustration due to slow-moving progress of Non-Nuclear Agreement between the two Koreas, in March 1993, North Korea announced its withdrawal from the NPT, hereby beginning of the ‘(First) North Korean Nuclear Crisis.’ The US government immediately stepped in to push North Korea to rejoin the NPT system. From that point on, the US and North Korea engaged in a series of intense tugs of war for more than a year and a half, and the two parties finally reached the Agreed Framework on October 21, 1994, in Geneva. Under the Framework, North Korea would give up any existing nuclear development programs and, in exchange, the United States and its allies would supply light water reactors for energy supplement. Progress in implementing the agreements was painfully slow due to domestic opposition in the United States and South Korea and disagreements on details among the involved parties.
In late 2002, North Korea, frustrated by the slow progress of economic cooperation and by the new Bush administration’s hawkish policy, admitted its clandestine nuclear development program. To deal with another round of the North Korean nuclear crisis, the China-brokered Six-Party Talks were convened, and the first meeting was held in August 2003. Despite bitter tension, especially between North Korea and the US, the participants finally reached an agreement at the fourth meeting in September 2005. Yet the much-heralded Six Party Agreement signed in September 2005 was instantly broken due to the ever-present mutual distrust and misunderstandings. The results were North Korea’s test of ballistic missiles in July and, even worse, their first test of a nuclear device in October 2006. After months of tense negotiations, the Six Parties yet again agreed to resolve the crisis peacefully in February 2007. Since this brief moment of hope, the situation has gone bad to worse: more nuclear and missile tests by Pyongyang amid absence of the Six Party Talks, which has not been held since 2008.

North Korea’s nuclear provocation remains one of the most troublesome reasons of instability and uncertainty of Northeast Asian security environment. Pyongyang has conducted four nuclear tests so far and numerous ballistic missile tests. Thus it may not be unreasonable to consider North Korea as a “de facto” nuclear weapon state even though international community refuses to recognize it. Scholars and experts have proposed a variety of policy prescriptions to stop or for Pyongyang to give up nuclear development efforts. Dynamic debates about North Korea’s motives and actual capability have also continued in both theoretical and policy arenas. Yet with all the practical purposes and to prevent conflict from breaking out, surrounding nations need to deal with North Korea as a country that possesses nuclear capability. However, if this is
the case, is it too late for North Korea reverses its nuclear course? If there still is a
chance what should we do? This study attempts to find out the way to make Pyongyang
reverse her nuclear trajectory. First, I identify North Korea’s true motives of nuclear
acquisition. Then I synthesize the literature and theory of nuclear abstinence and reversal
to learn right lessons that can be applied to the North Korean case and thereby explore a
policy to induce North Korea to forgo its existing nuclear weapons programs. I conclude
the paper with some policy recommendations.

Reasons behind North Korea’s nuclear ambition

The progress of the North Korean nuclear crisis has been a roller coaster ride for
the parties involved. So, why has North Korea made such an effort to develop its own
nuclear capability? The motivations that lead countries to pursue nuclear capability vary.
In general, nuclear weapons are acquired as deterrence against external threats, for
reasons of national prestige, or because of domestic coalitions among scientists, the
military, and bureaucrats. ¹

Many experts on North Korea agree that a prime motive of its nuclear quest is
security, to deter US nuclear use and to match the US nuclear umbrella. For example,
Mazarr argues that, as in other cases of proliferation for political motives, perceptions of

¹ On nuclear proliferation in general, see Nuno Monteiro and Alexandre Debs, “The Strategic Logic of
States Build Nuclear Weapons,” International Security, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Winter 1996), pp. 54-86; Zachary
Davis and Benjamin Frankel, (eds.), The Proliferation Puzzle: Why Nuclear Weapons Spread and What
Results (London: Frank Cass, 1993); and Bradley Thayer, “The Causes of Nuclear Proliferation and the
insecurity are the major driving force behind North Korea’s nuclear ambitions, and the technological opportunity factor is quite minimal.² Besides the security purpose, scholars also argue that nuclear weapons have been developed for economic reasons, as a cheaper tool to achieve national security as well as useful bargaining chips to achieve normalized relationships with its neighbors, especially with the United States.³ North Korea is also said to have tried to develop nuclear weapons not only as a tool of diplomacy to extract concessions though blackmail, but also for the purpose of regime preservation.⁴

Yet recently some scholars challenged the security-oriented nuclear proliferation argument by adopting domestic or individual-level models to explain the dynamics of nuclear proliferation in the world. Etel Solingen compares and contrasts East Asia and the Middle East to find out why the former has been moving in the direction of renouncing nuclear weapons while the latter has been moving toward acquiring the weapons.⁵ After listing the shortcomings of explanations based on external variables, especially the international structure model of neorealism, she argues that ‘domestic

⁴ An answer before the Committee on National Defense of the National Assembly by Yong-Ock Park, then head of the Arms Control Bureau of the Ministry of National Defense, on the question of the reasons behind North Korean nuclear development from 160th Hearing 3rd Session before Committee on National Defense (16 March, 1993). Also see Han S. Park, North Korea: The Politics of Unconventional Wisdom (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002), pp. 134-140.
models of political survival and their orientations to the global political-economy’ best explain the contrasting development trajectories of the two regions. Her main argument is that ‘leaders or coalitions advocating economic growth through integration in the global economy have incentives to avoid the costs of nuclearization....By contrast, nuclearization implies fewer costs for inward-looking leaders and for constituencies less dependent on international markets, investment, technology, and institutions.’

This is why most countries in East Asia, which have been vigorously promoting outward, export-oriented economy, are in firm positions of denuclearization. In contrast, autarchic leaders of Middle Eastern nations have been going in the opposite direction. Thus, North Korea, the only closed and inward-looking economy in the region, remains an anomaly in East Asia: they have been energetically pursuing going nuclear since they are less concerned about economic costs of nuclearization.

In the broad context of domestic politics, leaders’ threat perception and personal desire also demand thorough investigation as contributors to a country’s nuclear procurement. Several nuclear experts maintain that, in order for a country to develop its own nuclear weapons, the will of a national leader to stand up against internal and external pressure is much more important than money and technology. Thus, a country like North Korea is a likely candidate to go nuclear, because it has an unchallengeable leadership, despite international protests. For example, Peter Lavoy emphasizes the importance of the existence of ‘proficient and resourceful individuals,’ who act as ‘myth

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6 Ibid., p. 17.

7 Ibid. Ch. 6.
makers’ by exaggerating security threats to create a ‘myth of nuclear security’ and eventually justify going nuclear.  

Jacques Hymans argues that ‘decisions to go or not to go nuclear result not from the international structure, but rather from individual hearts.’ Based on what he calls national identity conception (NIC) of national leaders, Hymans first looks at the ‘solidarity’ dimension. If leaders feel that they naturally stand for starkly different interests and values, ‘us’ against ‘them,’ these leaders hold ‘oppositional’ NICs; otherwise, they hold ‘sportsmanlike’ NICs. In the ‘status’ dimension, if leaders believe they are equal (if not superior) to their ‘key comparison others’ in the international pecking order, the leaders hold ‘nationalist’ NICs; if not, they hold ‘subaltern’ NICs. According to Hymans, the four different NICs—oppositional nationalists, oppositional subalterm, sportsmanlike nationalists, and sportsmanlike subalterm—are decisive in shaping leaders’ foreign policy decisions, particularly nuclear armament decisions. For Hymans, only the oppositional nationalist is likely to seek nuclear capability, because ‘such a conception tends to generate the emotion of fear and pride – an explosive psychological cocktail. Driven by fear and pride, oppositional nationalists develop a desire for nuclear weapons that goes beyond calculation, to self expression.’

According to Hymans, North Korea’s leadership, Kim family dynasty of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jung Il, precisely fits the pattern on oppositional nationalists, thus

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8 Peter Lavoy, “Nuclear Myths and the Causes of Nuclear Proliferation,” in Davis and Frankel, (eds.), The Proliferation Puzzle, p. 192.
10 Ibid., p. 2.
permitting for Pyongyang to make the decision to go nuclear,\textsuperscript{11} which also conforms with Solingen’s model of the national leaders looking inward regarding the country’s economy. More than anything else, North Korea’s official state ideology, Juche, as Hymans shows, is based on national pride, independence, and the Leader’s absolute centrality in the decision-making process.\textsuperscript{12} Juche, which was developed in the 1950s and solidified in the 1960s. What Juche despises the most is \textit{sadaejui} (flunkeyism), serving and relying upon foreign powers.\textsuperscript{13} Kim Il Sung’s speeches are full of national pride, anti-imperialism (especially anti-American imperialism), and solidarity with other socialist-leaning nations—especially in the developing world—who share similar viewpoints toward the imperialist powers. Kim Il Sung viewed the United States as the number-one enemy of North Korea and the main stumbling block to Korean unification. In the late 1960s, Kim Il Sung did not hesitate to create a direct military provocation against the United States, as in the case of the Pueblo Incident in 1968. This self-pride is buttressed by a firmly held belief in the Leader’s infallibility.


\textsuperscript{13} Kim Il Sung claims that ‘if a nation falls into \textit{sadaejui}, this nation will go to ruin.’ In Bruce Cumings, \textit{Korea’s Place in the Sun: Modern History} (New York: W. W. Norton 1997), p. 404.
In the North Korean case, as in the oppositional nationalist NIC, this kind of pride is accompanied by fear, surrounded by hostile actors.\textsuperscript{14} North Korea’s fear of the presence of the USFK over its southern border has been well documented. Fear of insecurity led the Korean Workers Party to follow a parallel development policy of national defense and economy after 1966. Referring to the TS Exercise, Kim Il Sung repeatedly accused the US imperialists of planning a nuclear war over the Korean peninsula. After his visit to North Korea, former US Ambassador to Seoul Donald Gregg testified that North Korea was truly afraid of a possible attack from the United States.\textsuperscript{15} Robert Galluci, the chief negotiator of the Geneva Agreement, also testified that Pyongyang genuinely feared for its survival and thus seemed really to believe a nuclear arsenal was the only way to preserve the regime from a possible American attack.\textsuperscript{16} In the vicious action-reaction cycle of the security dilemma condition, North Korea still felt deeply threatened, even when the intentions of South Korea or the United States were defensive or deterrent. This hypersensitive insecurity pushed them to develop siege mentality.

Yet the common problem with the domestic or individual leadership model arguments of both Hyman and Solignen is that they downplay the importance of external security threats to North Korea as well as Pyongyang’s perception of vulnerability to

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external threats. In the case of North Korea, this threat perception has a broader basis than the nature and global orientation of domestic economy or the NIC of the leader. Regarding the security incentive, the United States repeatedly threatened that it would not hesitate to use tactical nuclear weapons, especially after the fall of Saigon, and the North Korean leadership took the threat seriously.17 Even before then, the Sino-Soviet split throughout the 1950s and 1960s put the North Korean leadership in very awkward position. Under the circumstances, it is not a coincidence that Juche became solidified during this period of deep suspicion of the security commitments of both of North Korea’s allies, China and the USSR.18 Yet an even bigger challenge and greater pressure came at the time of the end of the Cold War and its ensuing security uncertainty. Many realists argued that the end of the Cold War would bring a darker future for international security in general and nuclear proliferation in particular, and this grimmer tendency was believed to be especially worrisome in East Asia.19 In the Twenty-first century East Asia


18 Solingen’s claim that North Korea developed nuclear capability despite the Soviet’s security guarantee, is thus questionable, since Pyongyang did not consider Moscow’s (or Beijing’s) commitment credible. Also, Solingen’s neglect of the significance of the Sino-Soviet split and its impact on Pyongyang is highly problematic. In the 1960s, North Korea already had experienced serious friction with both allies. See Dae-Sook Suh, Kim Il Sung, pp. 176-208. The hidden distrust of and dormant animosity toward both Communist giants on the part of Kim Il Sung goes way back to his anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle period. During that time, he and his units were as much harassed and abused by both powers as they were at the hands of the Japanese. See Bruce Cumings, North Korea (New York: New Press, 2004), pp. 118-119.

acute conflicts of interests and security dilemmas, including the fear of nuclear proliferation, do exist in the region.

For North Korea, regional security uncertainty was certainly strong,\(^{20}\) and it is clearly the driving force behind North Korea’s nuclear efforts. Archrival South Korea took advantage of the changed situation and normalized diplomatic relations with Russia in 1991 and with China in 1992—both were former foes of the South Koreans. From the late 1980s, the relationship between the two Koreas also slowly thawed. The end of the Cold War, however, also enhanced North Korea’s desire to acquire nuclear capability. For the North Koreans, already making efforts to go nuclear to deter a possible US threat, the loss of a powerful nuclear ally (Russia) to their archenemy to the south was a major blow that spurred them to work faster and harder on the nuclear program.\(^{21}\)

A gradual distancing from her most reliable ally, China, was another devastating concern for North Korea’s security predicament. To achieve its primary goal of economic modernization, China desperately needed a favorable security environment. Thus, China openly stated that they wanted a reduction in tensions and peaceful co-existence on the Korean Peninsula: unification at all costs, as North Korea wanted, was


\(^{21}\) Although the Soviet Union’s security commitment was constantly distrusted by Pyongyang, the loss was still a critical blow.
likely to drag China into another costly conflict. China informed the United States and Japan several times as early as the mid-1980s that North Korea possessed neither the capability nor the will to unify the Peninsula by force, though the real audience for these comments was North Korea’s Kim Il Sung. Even in 1987, Deng Xiaoping said that if North Korea made another aggressive move, China would not support it. During the visit of President Jiang Zemin to Seoul in 1995, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson stated that the alliance (between China and North Korea) does not commit Chinese troops to defending North Korea, implying that Beijing would not support North Korea in a war initiated by Pyongyang. A military conflict or the collapse of North Korea would be likely to propel a huge number of refugees across the Chinese border and impose a significant strain on its drive toward economic development, something China must avoid at all costs. Thus, China wants North Korea and the Korean Peninsula as a whole to remain conflict-free and nuclear-free because of its strategic value as a buffer and the potential for disaster should it collapse. This is still the official position of Beijing despite its agreement to impose tougher sanctions on Pyongyang for its misdeeds.

Given this background, it would be problematic to attribute the fear and pride of North Korea solely to the NIC of the national leader or to the inward-looking and closed nature of the North Korean economy. North Korea’s evolution of fear and national pride and the development of an autarchic society and economy have not been an unreasonable response to rapid changes in its external security environment, changes that were often

unfavorable to North Korea’s interests. Juche itself was, many scholars argue, a product of the Sino-Soviet split in the 1950s and 1960s. When Kim Il Sung believed the credibility of North Korea’s allies had significantly weakened and felt the need to make the country independent from both Moscow and Beijing, the national philosophy that justifies that action became solidified.\textsuperscript{24} As shown above, North Korea’s fear of abandonment by unreliable allies continued in the post-Cold War Period and remained the driving force of nuclear development. Thus North Korea’s prime motivation for its pursuit of nuclear weapons is insecurity from the presence of hostile and superior US forces in the south and the loss of alliance security protection, rather than any push from Kim Il Sung (or Kim Jung Il) as an oppositional nationalist\textsuperscript{25} or the refusal of North Korea’s leadership to integrate into the world economy. Robert Powell confirms that since nuclear weapons will likely allow a small state with a strong resolve, regardless of regime type, to deter the United States from overthrowing its regime, the utility of nuclear deterrence for a small state like North Korea is tremendous.\textsuperscript{26} Monteiro and Debs


\textsuperscript{25} Hymans’ argument that countries like France pushed for nuclear acquisition despite the presence of the US nuclear umbrella is also questionable, because the French suspicion of the credibility of the US nuclear umbrella is well known. See Richard Smoke, National Security and Nuclear Dilemma: An Introduction to the American Experience in the Cold War (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), pp. 183-188. Pakistan also became seriously interested in acquiring nuclear weapons when they felt the United States could not be relied upon after the humiliating defeat by the Indian army in the 1971 War. Corera, Shopping for Bombs, p. 9.

also argue that security-based theory of nuclear proliferation is consistent with historical records of (limited) nuclear proliferation.\textsuperscript{27} However, as Gideon Rose argues, a nation’s foreign policy behavior, which is heavily influenced by its external security environment and its material capability, must be translated through the context of domestic politics.\textsuperscript{28} Thus, in the case of North Korea, the Leader’s perception and motivation and Pyongyang’s Juche-based structure also have to be systematically taken account into a study of North Korea’s nuclear ambition in order to grasp the whole picture.\textsuperscript{29}

### Lessons of nuclear reversal or abstinence

Although many international relations scholars study the causes of nuclear proliferation, a number of scholars focus attention on cases of nuclear abstinence or reversal. They investigate why technologically capable states abstain from acquiring such powerful and attractive weapons, and further, why some even give up weapons they already possess.\textsuperscript{30} Reiss argues that five factors have contributed to constrain countries’

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\item Monteiro and Debs, “Strategic Logic of Nuclear Proliferation.”
\item Monteiro and Debs also argue that Solingen’s economic orientation model and Hymans’ leader psychology model can be easily incorporated into their security-based logic and enrich the field. “Strategic Logic of Nuclear Proliferation,” pp. 47-8.
nuclear options, namely: ‘changes in the international system after the Cold War and their influence on “new thinking” about the value of nuclear weapons; a new kind of “dollar diplomacy”; US nonproliferation efforts; the quality of political leadership; and the global nonproliferation regime.’ Thus, economic and diplomatic incentives along with other multilateral efforts are important to pressure countries to abstain from acquiring nuclear weapons. As mentioned before, Solingen argues that internationalizing the domestic economy is essential for a country to reverse course.

By applying ‘prudential realism,’ in which states concerned with the most probable threat would consciously try to minimize security challenges by not generating intense security dilemmas, T. V. Paul argues that the nuclear choice of a technologically capable state is likely to ‘be influenced by the security environment and conflict level of the region.’ According to him, only a state in a high conflict zone, where protracted conflicts and enduring rivalry are strongly present, would be tempted to develop such weapons. Even these states could be dissuaded by their stronger allies’ security assurances. Therefore, only ‘technologically capable states that have an enduring rival and no strong alliance partner, or those that are isolated from the international


33 Ibid. pp. 21-23.
community,\textsuperscript{34} have the highest tendency to acquire nuclear armaments.\textsuperscript{35} Thus, his policy recommendation is simple and straightforward: in order to make them forgo their nuclear programs, integrate these countries into the international community rather than creating counterproductive coercive sanctions.\textsuperscript{36} Levite agrees with Paul that, among several factors favoring nuclear reversal,\textsuperscript{37} improvement in the external security situation stands out as the most important, although it may not by itself explain every case.\textsuperscript{38} His policy recommendation is similar to Paul’s, that to curb global nuclear proliferation one of the most desirable options is to create ‘a favorable general as well as nation-specific political climate for restraining and even suppressing nuclear ambitions.’\textsuperscript{39}

The case of South Africa, the only country to voluntarily dismantle its indigenous nuclear weapons and facilities, is exemplary.\textsuperscript{40} Pretoria’s decision to covertly build

\textsuperscript{34} Diplomatic isolation is a strong driving force for a country to move towards ‘going nuclear.’ Richard Betts argues that the pariah states that confront strong opposition from (often) much larger neighbors and are isolated from the rest of the world are prime candidates to go nuclear. Betts, ‘Paranoids, Pygmies, Pariahs and Nonproliferation Revisited,’ in Davis and Frankel, (eds.), \textit{The Proliferation Puzzle}, pp. 108-109.


\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{37} He defines nuclear reversal as ‘a phenomenon in which states embark on a path leading to nuclear weapons acquisition but subsequently reverse course, though not necessarily abandoning altogether their nuclear ambitions.’ Levite, “Never Say Never Again,” p. 61.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., pp. 68, 74.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., p. 86.

bombs in the late 1970s was known to be caused by growing insecurity, although remote and exaggerated at the time, and international isolation. Improvement in the external security environment (with the demise of the Cold War and the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola) and domestic political democratization (which resulted in an end to international isolation) contributed to De Klerk’s decision to roll back South Africa’s nuclear weapons programs and facilities. Although the South African case might be, as Liberman admits, too unique to be applied to other nuclear proliferation or non-nuclear proliferation cases, we still learn that perception of security is a great motivation for nuclear disarmament. In addition, a series of punitive approaches by US administrations in the 1960s and the 1970s had been counterproductive in its effect on South Africa’s nuclear choices.

Options for North Korea’s nuclear reversal

There has been a plethora of suggestions and recommendations proposed regarding how to stop North Korea’s nuclear ambition since the first North Korean

41 Ibid; Betts, ‘Paranoids, Pygmies, Pariahs and Nonproliferation Revisited.’ Because of the non-existence of an overwhelming security threat to South Africa, some suspect other factors such as the strong presence of nuclear scientists. Reiss, Bridled Ambition, pp. 29-30. Liberman combines security incentives, organization politics, and international pressure and the state’s sensitivity to it to explain South Africa’s going nuclear. Liberman, ‘The Rise and Fall of the South African Bomb.’


43 Liberman argues that ‘successful coercion requires a credible commitment to reward compliance.’ Ibid. p. 86. Also see Reiss, Without the Bomb, p. 32.
Nuclear Crisis in the early 1990s. Jonathan Pollack and Mitchell Reiss recognize three strategic options to constrain or dismantle North Korea’s nuclear weapons program: negotiation and engagement through security assurances, containment and isolation, and unilateral measures by the United States to forcibly eliminating North Korea’s nuclear capabilities.\textsuperscript{44} With some variance, the second and third options are what hawks prefer in the name of regime change.\textsuperscript{45} They refuse to negotiate with a regime they call morally reprehensible and vehemently oppose the Agreed Framework signed in 1994 and other engagement approaches on the basis that it rewards bad behavior. This view has been strengthened by a series of nuclear tests and the lack of meaningful result from negotiations with Pyongyang including the Six Party Talks.

In contrast to such hawkish beliefs that an evil man always leads to evil behavior (which produces the view that getting rid of the evil is the only solution), many scholarly analyses of nuclear proliferation counter that regime type has little or no effect on the regime’s nuclear decision.\textsuperscript{46} For example, Alexander Montgomery argues that the policy of regime change is self-defeating, because the harsh rhetoric and refusal to negotiate

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simply convince potential proliferators that only acquisition of nuclear weapons will
deter the US attempt at regime change. The hawkish policy will also push these isolated
states to cooperate with one another, which is detrimental to international security as a
whole. Regarding North Korea, Montgomery argues that ‘diplomatic incentives and
economic benefits including aid and suspension of sanctions,’ along with assurance that
North Korea will not be invaded, are more likely to prod them into giving up their
nuclear program.\footnote{Montgomery, ‘Ringing in Proliferation,’ pp. 181-182.}

Victor Cha argued that coercion or isolation would only exacerbate the situation
by expanding North Korea’s perception of their vulnerability. If pushed further, North
Korea might feel a greater need (not irrationally) to lash out hostilely, even though the
leadership knew victory was not possible. Since sticks will only work if North Korea has
something significant to lose and it has nothing to lose, further coercive pressure would

James Laney and Jason Shaplen also argue that because North Korea has
endured extreme economic hardships for decades, more economic sanctions are not likely
to work.\footnote{James Laney and Jason Shaplen, “How to Deal with North Korea,” \textit{Foreign Affairs}, Vol. 82, No. 2 (March/April 2003), pp. 16-30.}

David Kang adds that since North Korea already feels deeply threatened, more
threats will hardly change their behavior.\footnote{David Kang, “Why Are We Afraid of Engagement?” in Cha and Kang, (eds.), \textit{Nuclear North Korea}, p. 120.}
If isolation or regime change is not a solution for North Korea’s nuclear reversal, what is? Paul argues that moving a state from a high-threat zone to a moderate-threat or, desirably, low-threat zone is the best way to make it possible for the state to forswear its nuclear ambition. The zones of lower security threat are characterized by much less threat perception from the significant others and by higher levels of economic interdependence.  Many nuclear proliferation scholars concur in this recommendation and agree, in general, that security assurances by (bigger) allies have been the key factor permitting many technologically capable states to abstain from nuclear weaponization programs.

Some argue that economic benefits are as important a driving force behind North Korea’s security policy as its security environment. For example, by using a mercantile realism framework, C. S. Eliot Kang argues that understanding North Korea’s long-term goal of achieving an economically viable state is necessary to comprehend the country’s security policy behavior. A policy recommendation derived from this argument is to provide economic concessions to North Korea in exchange for its nuclear programs. Thus, it is imperative that North Korea’s ‘significant other states in its neighborhood’ significantly improve economic interactions with North Korea as well as formally guarantee security for the country in order to erase North Korea’s need for such weapons.


However, recent developments have worsened overall security environment in the region and limited options available for the involved parties. First of all, thanks to four nuclear device tests, whether each test was successful or not, and several tests of potential delivery systems of nuclear warhead, mostly ballistic missiles including ICBMs, Pyongyang’s nuclear capability has significantly strengthened. Experts estimate that Pyongyang is likely to possess 20 to 100 nuclear warheads by 2020.\textsuperscript{54} North Korea’s nuclear deterrence strategy will be based on assured destruction due to continuing upgrade and increase of nuclear technology, a number of warheads and variance of nuclear delivery systems.\textsuperscript{55} Bell argues that a state that has newly acquired nuclear capability is emboldened to pursue independent foreign policy that may not be supported by its ally. He specifically picks North Korea as a country that is not likely to be deterred by China’s efforts to constrain it thanks to her newly acquired nuclear capability.\textsuperscript{56} Considering earlier recommendations for nuclear reversal includes a major power ally’s security guarantee as a key prescription, now it has become harder for Beijing or anyone else to pressure Pyongyang to think otherwise.

Another deep concern is unwanted changes that befell on some of the countries that had nuclear ambition or possessed nuclear weapons in the past. After 9/11 the US


invaded Iraq on the accusation of clandestinely developing WMD, which Baghdad attempted but failed. Although this accusation turned out to be completely unfounded, Iraq’s long-time dictator Saddam Hussein was arrested and executed. When the Arab Spring spread to Libya in 2011, the rebel forces captured and executed its long-time dictator Muammar Gadaffi with the help of NATO intervention. Libya once tried to acquire nuclear capability despite economic sanctions but they gave it up through negotiation with the US in late 2003.\textsuperscript{57} Ukraine lost her territory of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 because of the Russian assertion and the West’s acquiescence. Ukraine signed the Budapest protocol in 1994, which they agreed to give up and dismantle nuclear weapons they inherited after the demise of the Soviet Union, and in return they were assured that their territorial integrity would be intact.\textsuperscript{58} All of these incidents would give the North Korean leadership a strong lesson, rightfully or wrongly, that for regime survival they should keep developing nuclear capability and must never give it up under any circumstances. Thus, even Beijing seems to have a hard time to deal with Pyongyang who is determined in its nuclear option. Furthermore, due to continuing provocations and worsening human rights conditions, hardline approach has gained momentum against North Korea around the world including the countries around the Korean Peninsula.

\textsuperscript{57} Norman Cigar, "Libya's Nuclear Disarmament: Lessons and Implications for Nuclear Proliferation," Middle Eastern Studies Monographs, No. 2, January 2012.

Conclusion

North Korea’s nuclear choice can be best understood as resulting from its external security environment. In the case of North Korea, high perception of threat from the United States, diplomatic isolation from the international community, and a feeling of abandonment from its traditional allies, especially after the end of the Cold War, pushed it to seek nuclear weapons as a reliable security deterrent. Characteristics of the leader’s mindset, domestic politics, and global economic position that favor a nuclearization policy are also present, but these seem to be subsidiary to—and in most cases result from—North Korea’s precarious security position. Also, the removal of external security threat has been by far the most decisive factor leading technologically capable states to forswear nuclear ambition. That being so, coercion alone or changes in leadership are not productive approaches: a lasting reversal of North Korean nuclearization may hinge on lessening the security threat and increasing economic integration. To make this happen, security guarantees and economic exchange would be the necessary first steps. However, due to the recent events that happened to some of the nuclear ambitious states or a state that willfully gave up, as shown above, Pyongyang seems to be more determined than ever to keep it.\(^5^9\) North Korea even put nuclear weapon status in its constitution in 2013 and firmly announced it will promote the byungjin strategy for the nation, which calls for securing a nuclear arsenal while trying to rebuild the moribund economy at the same time in the recent Party Congress in May 2015 along with Kim Jung Un proudly declaring nuclear weapons bring dignity to his country.\(^6^0\) Other countries, including

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China, are more frustrated and angry than ever because of North Korea’s recalcitrant behavior and ceaseless provocations. Does this mean that it is too late for Pyongyang’s nuclear reversal?

There have been extremely tough sanctions imposed on North Korea. Seoul seems to be determined to push for a regime change. Yet now is also time to calmly contemplate and calculate all the options and choices. Most of all, if the current path is the right one for ultimate objective of all these international efforts, denuclearization of North Korea, needs to be carefully evaluated. Despite high expectation, sanctions may not work to change Pyongyang’s behavior, since North Korea is used to this kind of tough circumstances and has developed coping mechanism to survive.61 Besides, in spite of the current despair regarding Kim Jung Un regime, China is not likely to go that far.62 The recent visit to Beijing by a North Korean high ranking official and his meeting with President Xi as well as the constant spar and disagreement over how to make denuclearization of North Korea happen between the US and China in such high-level meetings as the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore and the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue in Beijing recently suggest that China does not want the collapse of North Korea, which the current tough sanction may cause.63 If the push is designed to make the current trend irreversible, then North Korea would have less incentive, not more, to come to negotiating table. Earlier cases of nuclear reversal show that coercion and


63 “Pressure on N. Korea expected to be key sticking point in US-China Strategic Talk,” Yonhap, June 4, 2016.
isolation alone hardly work. The successful diplomatic negotiations to stop nuclear development program of Libya in 2003\textsuperscript{64} and Iran in 2015 demonstrate that a lengthy period of patient diplomacy and providing both costs and benefits are the only way to reach an agreement.\textsuperscript{65}

Pyongyang’s provocations must be punished, but cornering them to the end with no room to maneuver may not work. Exhausting all possible leverages might not be the smartest strategy and could cause unwanted and unexpected situation. Given the previous failures, the process will be long and arduous. In order to make North Korea’s nuclear reversal, should it happen, permanent and robust, sanctions as well as other means need to be employed and patiently implemented with great flexibility. As the first step concerned parties may try to negotiate to stop what Pyongyang is doing rather than undoing what it has done. This next step could follow after the successful first step.\textsuperscript{66} The possibility of North Korea’s nuclear reversal is certainly slim but not completely disappeared.

\textsuperscript{64} The ultimate demise of Gadaffi does not make the diplomatic accomplishment in 2003 fruitless, since his execution in 2011 happened completely unrelated with the US diplomatic objectives eight years ago as an unexpected turn of events during the Arab Spring.


\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., p. 51.
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